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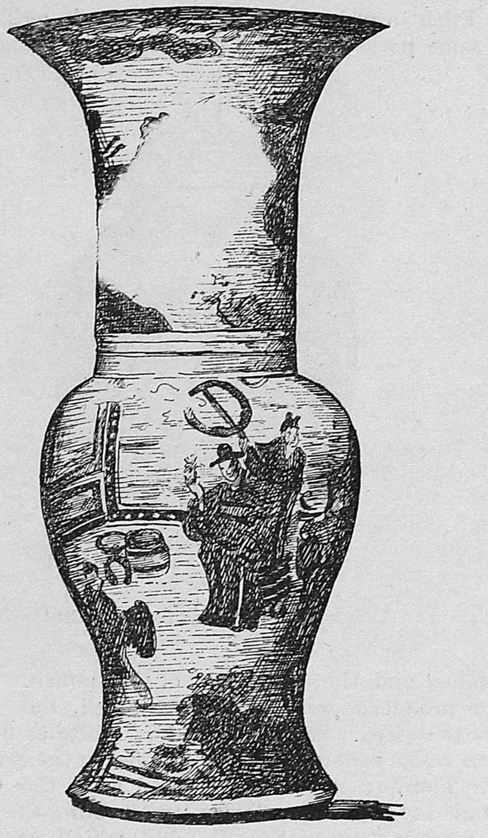
ORIENTAL PORCELAIN: CHINA.

By Maude Haywood.

ALTHOUGH considerable obscurity reigns over the history of its earlier periods, the extreme antiquity of Chinese porcelain, and the great perfection to which it had attained ages before it was heard of in Europe, is well authenticated. Manufactories had already existed for centuries in the Celestial Empire, the invention dating as far back as before the Christian era, when the attempts at imitation, which led to the first production of European hard porcelain were made in the beginning of the eighteenth century by Böttcher, in Germany.

The Chinese ware, which is especially distinguished for the beauty of its fine, hard, translucent paste, was first made generally known in Europe by the Portugese on the return of their ships from a voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, 1518, but we find incidental references to it in the records of earlier travellers and specimens seem to have been brought into the states of Barbary, during the Middle Ages. Some even suppose that ancient Chinese porcelain found its way into Europe through the conquests of the Romans in the East, and it would have been very possible. According to the native annals of the seventh and eighth centuries, vessels from China traded with the ports of the south coast of Arabia and the Persian Gulf. This is confirmed by a well authenticated MS. of Soliman, an Arabian merchant, which is extant in the Imperial library at Paris. Thèvenot, in his "Voyages Curieuses," states that sometimes over 400 vessels laden with wares, would be lying at the same time in the Persian Gulf.


Beaker in Blue and White, British Museum.

Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller, and the first European on record to penetrate into the Chinese Empire, makes mention of the vast manufactories of porcelain existing there in the thirteenth century. He was absent altogether twenty-six years and had ample opportunities of studying the manners and customs of the people, being well received by the Emperor of Tartary. He describes the process observed by him "in this place, Kinsai," how that the people collected a kind of earth which they obtained from a mine, and laying it on a large heap, left it exposed to the action of the wind, rain and sun, for thirty or forty years in order to refine it. From this they formed the vessels laying on the colors and afterwards baking them. About the same period several references to Oriental porcelain are found in different authorities, and specimens were in divers manners imported into Europe, some coming probably through Egypt. The Portuguese at first obtained the ware through their Indian trade, bringing it to the Peninsula, but later the Dutch introduced it in considerable quantities from both India and Japan into their own and neighboring countries. For a long time the endeavors made to gain a direct trade with China were fruitless, until the conquest of that country by the Tartars, apparently creating an advantageous opportunity, the Dutch East India Company sent an embassy with a view of establishing commercial relations, which was favorably received by the Grand Khan (1655–7.)

Blue Jar decorated with Imperial Five Clawed Dragon (17th Century), Wing Period.

The difficulties connected with obtaining the porcelain from the Chinese, were greatly increased by their own secresy, and by their habitual dislike and distrust of foreigners. In order to lead those astray who were anxious to obtain information on the subject, and in order also to enhance the value of their wares, they told all kinds of fabulous stories about the materials used in its composition. They pretended that bones, fish-scales, marine shells, egg-shells and other substances were employed, that they had to be buried in the ground for a century or more, the valuable porcelain earth being bequeathed from father to son. They claimed all kinds of wonderful properties for the manufactured articles, for instance, that in their extreme delicacy, the fragile drinking cups were so sensitive to poison, that its contact would cause them to shiver into a thousand pieces or in other cases would produce a bubbling motion in the center of the liquid. Moreover the finest wares they refused to export, especially that of a yellow color made exclusively for the use of the Emperor;

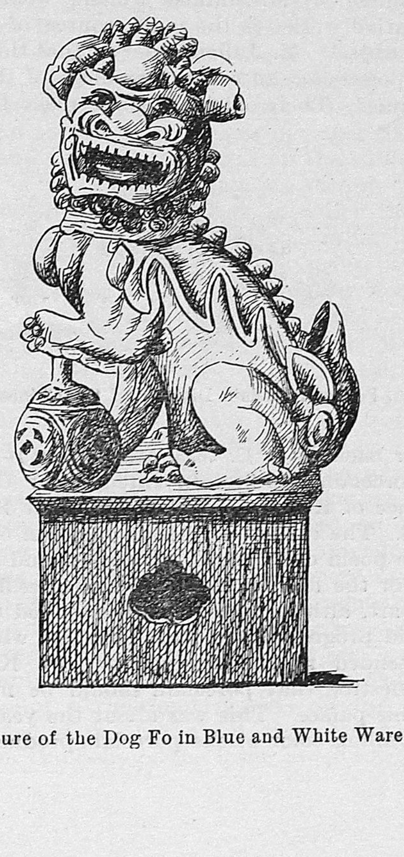
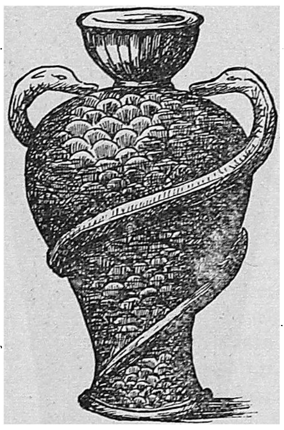


Figure of the Dog Fo in Blue and White Ware.

in effect the greater quantity sent to Europe was manufactured expressly for that purpose, and called Yang-khi, vases for foreigners, literally, "for the sea." Any kind of deception practiced on the "sea devils," as they termed the merchants, was deemed legitimate, and the frauds, especially as regards the date of the ancient, or supposed ancient porcelain, were innumerable, easy of accomplishment, and difficult of detection. As a matter of fact, it is almost impossible to tell with certainty the positive age of any piece of ware, since the manufactories were constantly reproducing their own earlier works.

The French were the first to gain to any extent reliable information about the process of manufacture, through Francis Xavier d'Entrecolles, superintendent of the French Jesuits in China. He obtained specimens of the two substances used in the composition of the porcelain, the Kaolin or clay, which is infusible, and the Pe-tun-tse, composed of felspar or petro-silex, which is fusible. These he sent to Paris with such details of the method as he could gain from the natives, about 1712, together with a description of the immense manufactory of King-te-tchin, which is most interesting. He represents it as only requiring walls to be considered a city, and with an estimated population of one million. All the materials used had to be brought from a distance, which was facilitated by its situation close to a river issuing from the mountains surrounding the extensive plain upon which it was built. The ships bringing the raw substances carried away the manufactured wares. The large number of its furnaces occasioned frequent fires, for protection against which the superstitious work people erected numerous temples to the genius of Fire. It was governed by a single mandarin, the police regulations being so excellent that there was never the slightest disorder to fear. Every street had one or more chiefs to overlook the conduct of the inhabitants, each chief having ten subalterns who were made answerable for the same number of houses. The streets were all closed and baricaded at night, with watchmen to look after them. In case of insubordination or infraction of the regulations the bastinado was liberally applied. Strangers visiting the place, had to sleep on board vessels, unless they had friends who would be responsible for them. This was considered a necessary precaution in so rich a community.



Blue Vase with Twined Serpents (17th Century) Wing Period.

A history of the manufactory of King-te-tchin, translated from the Chinese by M. Stanilas Julien, with notes collected from other native works, is the main source of information we have on the subject. M. Julien observes that the Chinese are the only people possessing an exact chronology of their history from the earliest times. Their official records place the invention of pottery as far back as B. C. 2698, attributing it to the Emperor Hoang-ti. Porcelain was first invented under the Han dynasty in the province of Ho-nan, between the year B. C. 185 and the Christian era. The earliest authentic mention of it to be found is in a native poem dated B. C. 175 to 151, and relates to green porcelain. For the first three or four centuries little progress was made in the art, although its pursuit extended to several localities. Its rapid progress dated from the time when royal patronage was extended to the manufactory by King-te-tchin, the Emperor requesting that porcelain should be made for his use and sent to his palace. This was about the year 585. The fact that the prevailing color of the porcelain produced was according to the taste and express command of the reigning dynasty, is a help towards fixing the date of the earlier ware. The Tsin dynasty preferred blue, the Soui (581-618) green, the Thang (618-969) white. The most ancient of all is a white of great purity and brilliancy of polish, of which only small fragments now exist, but so highly prized by the Chinese themselves that they enclose them in cases of silk and velvet, regarding them as precious jewels.

Pousa, Porcelain Divinity of the Chinese.

Of the early ware the following five principal varieties have been given, arranged in order, according to the estimation in which they are held: (1.) First and most greatly valued comes the Tch 'aï-yao or Tch aï porcelain, manufactured 954 in the province of Ho-nan. It is of a beautiful blue. Tradition says that the Emperor being requested to name the color he preferred, replied. "Let it be of the azure tint of the sky as it appears between the clouds after rain." It is described by an admiring Chinese author as "blue as the sky, brilliant as a mirror, thin as paper, sonorous as a ting, polished and shining, and as remarkable for the delicacy of its veins or crackles as for the beauty of its color."

(2.) Next in estimation is the Jou-yao or porcelain of Jou-thcheon, made in the province of Kan-son, under the dynasty of the Song (960-1279), who ordered the establishment of the manufactory. This porcelain was also blue and crackled, with "veins like the roe of a fish," one writer stating that the ware whose crackles resembled "the buds of the Aralia or the stripes on the claws of a crab," were most preferred.

(3.) Under the same dynasty a porcelain called Kouan-yao, "for magistrates," was also produced, of a light and dark blue, deep green and "white of the moon," (1107-1117).

(4.) Also under the Song Emperor, and fourth in value comes the Ko-yao, porcelain made by the elder of the two celebrated workmen of the Tchang family, the most esteemed being pale blue or the color of rice, and crackled.

(5.) Fifth in order is the Ting-yao made at Tching-yeon during the same period, its chief characteristic being the whiteness of its enamel and the brilliancy of its polish. Various colors were also produced, red, brown and black, but the white and red were preferred. Some was plain, "white as flour," some had flowers in relief, others had them graved in the paste, moulded or painted. The flowers principally used were the Chinese peony, the orange day-lily, and a flower "resembling the flying phœnix."

Vase of the Rose Family, 18th Century.

The manufactory of King-te-tchin, which was situated in the province of Kian-si, became celebrated as has been already stated as early as the Tch'in dynasty (577-588), at that time being known as Nan-Tchang-Tchin; it was under the Song dynasty several centuries later that it received its present name. Under the Mongolian emperors the governor-general of Kian-si was made inspector of the porcelain (1324-1327), and in 1369 a special magistrate was appointed to preside over the manufactory. Its productions were two kinds, the new and original work, and the imitation of old porcelain of their own and other establishments, which they were in the habit of making from the very earliest period. The older records are lost, destroyed by Che-Hoang-Ti, who built the great wall of China and founded the dynasty of Tsin, B. C. 247. He ordered all annals to be burned, wishing to be regarded as the sole founder of the Chinese Empire. Authentic history begins with the Soui Emperors in the sixth century. Under the Song dynasty in the eleventh century, at a time when the whole nation was engaged in its finest art productions, the imperial manufactory was established at King-te-tchin, and porcelain made of a pale blue or rice color, moonwhite and deep green.

During this period, too, there lived two skilled and celebrated artists, "the venerable Chou" and "the fair Chou," his daughter, renowned for their white and violet porcelain. For the Mongolian emperors (1260—1368) white and blue ware was made in large quantities, and had to be so perfect that only about ten pieces out of a thousand were considered fit for their use. The next, the Ming period (1368—1649), is considered the finest by Chinese antiquaries, the art reaching its highest about the middle of the fifteenth century. Most beautiful work was produced. Large jars, ornamented with dragons, which were exposed unglazed for a year to dry, then reduced in thickness by the potter's wheel, until the enamel appeared, as the natives say, "shining like a layer of congealed fat"; delicate cups of a vivid red, sky blue or white, "brilliant as jade," some with their surface granulated "like the skin of a fowl or the peel of a sweet orange"; vases crackled like glass, or with veins, "red as the blood of an eel"; bowls, decorated with wonderful representations of crickets fighting—these and many more besides, testify to the marvellous ingenuity and patient industry of this peculiar people. Their designs cannot be termed strictly artistic, and are mechanical and laborious in execution; they are entirely lacking in imagination, but they are quaint, original and fantastic. The fact that they go on copying the same forms for a thousand years or more, without the least attempt at progress or improvement is in keeping with their national character. They seem to have a particular fondness for articles involving clever or intricate workmanship, for instance, cups or vases made in two parts to fit one in the other, articulating perfectly, or decorations with very minute designs. Another fancy was for tea cups of the most delicate eggshell within another of open or lace work pattern, so that the outer cup never becoming overheated, the fingers would not be burnt, however hot the liquid. The "eggshell" china was greatly admired and high rewards were given to those workmen who succeeded in producing the thinnest ware; glazed cups and vases were put on the wheel and ground down until there seemed to be little but the glaze remaining, they were almost transparent and so extremely fragile, that existing specimens are very rare. Some of it appeared plain, but was so decorated that the subject could only be seen by holding it up to the light, as with the water mark in paper. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the introduction of foreign cobalt, which was henceforth used in the manufacture, was an important event—it produced an exquisite blue, and was greatly used for the Imperial ware. Being so very valuable, worth its weight in gold, it was found that at first the workmen stole it continually, which was only prevented by punishments, severe and cruel as hardly any but Chinese punishments can be. A hundred years later and the art was much declining, the supply of cobalt failing, the finest beds of clay becoming exhausted, and the taste displayed in the paintings on the ware, shockingly depraved.

DECORATIVE SUGGESTION—The End of the Song, by Max Ehler.

Jacquemart has suggested the following classification of Chinese porcelain into four families, all not coming under these heads being treated as exceptions.

(1). Archaic, chiefly white, blue, violet and the green called celadon, in which the colors were mixed with the glaze and burnt in at the first firing.

(2). Chrysanthemo-Pœonienne, so called from the prevailing flowers used in the decoration. All colors were used in the painting, deep blue, iron-red, gold and black or blue. This family consisted principally of large jars, such as those used for potpourri.

(3). Famille Verte, of which the decorations were usually of an historical or religious character, being mostly vessels intended for use in the temples.

(4). Famille Rose, chiefly pieces very perfect in execution, and appropriated to the use of the imperial family, including all styles of subject and design.

The marks were of two kinds, the one indicating the period, and the other either the maker, the place of manufacture, or the use for which the ware was intended. The decorations were full of symbolism. Dragons were much employed, those with five claws being the Imperial sign. Those with four claws signifying princes of a lower rank. The little corpulent figures so often met with were of the divinity of the porcelain makers, Pousa. Before quitting the subject, mention must be made of the "Porcelain Tower" of Nankin, which was so utterly destroyed by the Taepings that not one fragment remains of it. It was completed in 1431 upon the site of a yet older tower, after nineteen years' labor, and at the cost of more than three and a half million dollars. It consisted of nine stories, being 330 feet in height, and was entirely overlaid with enameled bricks in white, red, blue and green. It was built as a Temple of Gratitude.

ILLUSTRATED work differs from ordinary news-work in one important particular. In a mass of type of the same size the pressure is even, but where there are blocks with much black on them or open work, the resistane is uneven, and the pressure consequently varies. The black blocks resist more than type, and open blocks hardly resist at all; and thus cuts with much contrast of light and shade require much more pressure in some parts than in others, and to print a cut properly the pressure must be in proportion to the resistance. The way in which this result is obtained is called over-laying. Thomas Bewick, of Newcastle, the father of modern wood-engraving, is said to have introduced overlays; but this cannot be true, for there are marks of unequal pressure in several seventeenth century prints. Bewick, too, is said to have been the first to lower his blocks a shade where he wanted a delicete tint; but the dodge is at least as old as Holbein's "Dance of Death." He also is said to have been the first to cut on the columnar fibre of wood; but that practice was recommended in Papillon's book when Bewick was six years old. However, he may have been the first to use all three contrivances together; and as to the overlaying, he certainly seems to have independently invented it or revived it after a long interval. The practice is somewhat of an art or mystery, but its principle is clear. The printer cannot decrease the ordinary pressure, but where blackness is wanted the pressure can be increased by thickening the cylinder, and the cylinder is thickened just at the spot required by pasting pieces of paper on to it. These pieces of paper have to be of a peculiar shape, and the shape depends on the subject. Three or four impressions of the cut are taken on thinish paper. These impressions are not like artists' proofs, in which the ink is modulated, but they are hard, crude pulls, showing what the cut would look like if left to itself; and the printer's object is to arrange his overlays so as to make the impression worked off the machine look as much like the artist's proof as he can manage. With a pair of scissors he snips out of one of his flat pulls all the light shading and fine work. He then snips away from another pull everything but the deep blacks. He then snips another pull so as to leave the blacks and half tints. And with another he may leave a little more of the shading. He may even make six overlays, or—and it is better if he can so manage it—he may do with three. He then pastes these together one over the other, so as to make the thinest possible pad on the cylinder, and when they are dry he takes a proof impression, and trims the pad till he has it correct, giving dark where dark should be, light where light should be, and every intermediate tint, but without clogging a line in the dark, or losing a single dot in the lightest work of the original. By this slight patch on the cylinder he will probably have attained at the point of greatest resistance a pressure of a thousand pounds on the square inch, whereas in the open work of the cut the pressure will be no more than that on the body of the letter-press.—*Leisure Hour.*